

Invest in America: Educate Latinos

BY SARITA BROWN

sbrown@edexcelencia.org

For most of the 20th century, the United States could take pride in having the best educated workforce in the world. That is no longer the case.

A 2007 report, "Tough Choices for Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce" observes: ``Thirty years ago the United States could lay claim to having 30 percent of the world's population of college students. Today that proportion has fallen to 14 percent and is continuing to fall."

Despite this discouraging trend, we still have the power to reverse the downward spiral and regain our standing as a leader in the educated world. One important opportunity lies in educating the U.S. Latino population for the jobs and civic duties of the future.

A nation's most precious resource is its people, and the Latino community is one of our fastest growing and youngest populations, which will be part of a growing proportion of our work force. Today, 37 percent of the more than 40 million Latinos in this country are under 20 years of age. The toddlers of today will be college-age in 2020 when census projections estimate that Latinos will be 22 percent of the nation's college-age population.

Some find these numbers alarming and react by calling for new spending on border fences and law enforcement. A new book edited by former HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros, *Latinos and the Nation's Future*, points out that even if the border were so tightly shut that not a single new immigrant entered the country, by 2050 Latinos will make up 25 percent of the U.S. population.

Moreover, 97 percent of Latino students are U.S. citizens or permanent residents. They are disproportionately under-educated and poor, compared to Americans as a whole. It's hard to see how our national economy will grow if one-fourth of our population is held back by the lack of a college education.

If educational outcomes do not improve, our country could experience a shortage of 12 million college-educated workers by 2020. The time for investing in and implementing innovative tactics and proven strategies to nurture Latino talent is now.

- **First**, we must eliminate the misguided belief by many that Latinos do not value education. The majority of Latino families think that a good education is critical to personal success for their children and themselves.

While Latino belief in the value of post-secondary education is solid, Latino students, who make up one in five public school students today, need assistance in learning the practical steps to

succeeding in college. Answering this need will not be at the expense of other students. In fact, the strategies that serve Latino students, benefit all students.

- **Second**, we must reduce the financial burden on all low-income Americans who seek higher education. As states work to address budget shortfalls, they are raising tuition and cutting back on enrollments -- just as the number of Latinos seeking college is growing.

- **Third**, we must consider policies that address the specific needs and strengths of Latino students. While the mantra of the Obama administration is "One America," my organization, Excelencia in Education, has found that Latino students thrive with culturally relevant support and flexible scheduling that address the realities of their day-to-day lives.

The federal government and the states must invest in productive, low-cost schools that educate new college entrants. The current "amenities arms race," fueled with public dollars, in which elite state institutions compete with private colleges for top students, must be replaced with immediate and direct help for low-income students to earn degrees.

Supporting institutions that make it easier for community college students to transfer and succeed in four-year schools must be a priority.

Addressing the needs of low-income Latino students and other first-generation college goers must be a priority. This will send the convincing message to young Latinos, You are critical to our nation's future, and we will not let you fail.

By committing to educating the fastest growing segment of our population, our country can again be at its best, strengthened by the energy of millions of college-going Latinos eager to enrich America's future.

Sarita Brown is president of Excelencia in Education, a Washington, D.C.-based education policy nonprofit organization, and a contributor to Latinos and the Nation's Future, a new book by Arte Público Press of the University of Houston.